**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-005. THE KING IN EXILE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and His mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy Him. 14. When he arose, he took the young child and His mother by night, and departed into Egypt; 15. And was there until the death of Herod; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My son. 16. Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. 17. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 18. In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. 19. But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth to a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20. Saying, Arise, and take the young child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for they are dead which sought the young child's life. 21. And he arose, and took the young child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22. But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judæ¡ in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither; notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: 23. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene."*

*Matthew 2:13-23*

Delitzsch, in his New Investigations into the Origin and Plan of the Canonical Gospels, tries to show that Matthew is constructed on the plan of the Pentateuch. The analogy is somewhat strained, but there are some striking points of correspondence. He regards Matthew 1. to 2:15 as answering to Genesis. It begins with the genesis of Jesus, and, as the Old Testament book ends with the migration of Israel to Egypt, so this section of the Gospel ends with the flight of the Holy Family to the same land. The section from 2:15 to the end of the Sermon on the Mount answers to Exodus, and here the parallels are striking. The murder of the innocents at Bethlehem by Herod answers to Pharaoh's slaughter of Hebrew children; the Exodus, to the return to Nazareth; the call of Moses at the bush, to the baptism of Jesus; the forty years in the wilderness, to the forty days desert hunger and temptation; and the giving of the law from Sinai, to the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the new law for the kingdom of God. Without supposing that the evangelist moulded his Gospel on the plan of the Pentateuch, we cannot but see that there is a real parallel between the beginnings of the national life of Israel and the commencement of the life of Christ. Our present text brings this parallel into great prominence. It is divided into three sections, each of which has for its centre an Old Testament prophecy.

**I. We have first the flight into Egypt and the prophecy fulfilled therein.**

The appearance of the angel seems to have followed immediately on the departure of the Magi. They were succeeded by a loftier visitor from a more distant land, coming to lay richer gifts and a more absolute homage at the infant's feet. The angel of the Lord, who had already eased Joseph's honest and troubled heart by disclosing the secret of Mary's child, comes again. To Mary he had appeared waking; her meek eyes could look on him, and her obedient ears hear his voice. But Joseph, who stood on a lower spiritual level, needed the lower form of revelation by dream, which betokens less susceptibility in the recipient and less importance in the communication. It is the only form appropriate to his power of receiving, and four times it is mentioned as granted to him. The warning to the wise men was also conveyed in a dream. We can scarcely help recalling the similar prominence of dreams in the history of the earlier Joseph, whose life was moulded in order to bring Israel into Egypt.

The angel speaks of the young child and His mother, reversing the order of nature, as if he bowed before the infant, Lord of men as well as angels, and would deepen the lesson which so many signs gathering round the cradle were teaching the silent Joseph,--that Mary and he were but humble ministers of the child's. The partial instruction given, and the darkness left lying over the future, are in accordance with the methods of God's leading, which always gives light enough for the next duty, and never for the one after that. The prompt and precise obedience of Joseph to the heavenly vision is emphatically expressed by the verbal repetition of the command in the account of its fulfilment. There was no hesitation, no reluctance, no delay. On the very night, as it appears, of the dream, he rose up; the simple preparations were quickly made; the wise men's gifts would help to sustain their modest wants, and before the day broke they were on their road. How strangely blended in our Lord's life, from the very dawning, are dignity and lowliness, glory and reproach! How soon His brows are crowned with thorns! The adoration of the Magi witnesses to Him as the King of Israel and the hope of the world. The flight of which that adoration was the direct cause witnesses no less clearly to Him as despised and rejected, tasting sorrow in His earliest food, and not having where to lay His head.

But the most important part of the story is the connection which Matthew discerns between it and Hosea's words. In their original place they are not a prophecy at all, but simply a part of a tender historical résumé of God's dealings with Israel, by which the prophet would touch his contemporaries hearts into penitence and trust. How, then, is the evangelist justified in regarding them as prophetic, and in looking on Christ's flight as their fulfilment? The answer is to be found in that analogy between the national and the personal Israel which runs through all the Old Testament, and reaches its greatest clearness in the second part of Isaiah's prophecies. Jesus Christ was what Israel was destined and failed to be, the true Servant of God, His Anointed, His Son, the medium of conveying His name to the world. The ideal of the nation was realised in Him. His brief stay in Egypt served the very same purpose in His life which their four hundred years there did in theirs,--it sheltered Him from enemies, and gave Him room to grow. Just as the infant nation was unawares fostered in the very lap of the country which was the symbol of the world hostile to God, so the infant Christ was guarded and grew there. The prophecy is a prophecy just because it is history; for the history was all a shadow of the future, and He is the true Israel and the Son of God. It would have been fulfilled quite as really, that is to say, the parallel between Christ and the nation would have been as fully carried out, if His place of refuge had been in some other land; but the precise outward identity helps to point the parallel to unobservant eyes. The great truth taught by it of the typical relation between the nation and the Person is the key to large regions of Old Testament history and prophecy. Rightly, therefore, does Matthew call our attention to this pregnant fact, and bid us see in the divine selection of the place where the young life of God manifest in the flesh was sheltered, a fulfilment of prophecy. Egypt was the natural asylum of every fugitive from Palestine, but a deeper reason bent the steps of the Holy Family to the shelter of its palms and temples.

**II. The slaughter of the innocents, and the prophecy fulfilled therein.**

Herod's fierce rage, enflamed by the dim suspicion that these wily Easterns have gone away laughing in their sleeves at having tricked him, and by the dread that they may be stirring up armed defenders of the infant King, is in full accord with all that we know of him. The critics who find the story of the massacre unhistorical, because Josephus does not mention it, must surely be very anxious to discredit the evangelist, and very hard pressed for grounds to do so, or they would not commit themselves to the extraordinary assumption that nothing is to be believed outside of the pages of Josephus. A splash or two of blood of poor innocents, more or less, found on the Idumean tyrant's bloody skirts, could be of little consequence in the eyes of those who knew what a long saturnalia of horrors his reign had been; and the number of the infants under two years old in such a tiny place as Bethlehem would be small, so that their feeble wail might well fail to reach the ears even of contemporaries. But there is no reason for questioning the simple truth of a story so like the frantic cruelty and sleepless suspicion of the grey-headed tyrant, who was stirred to more ferocity as the shades of death gathered about him, and power slipped from his rotting hands. Of all the tragic pictures which Scripture gives of a godless old age, burning with unquenchable hatred to goodness and condemned to failure in all its antagonism, none is touched with more lurid hues than this. What a contrast between the king de jure, the cradled infant; and the king de facto, going down to his loathsome death, which all but he longed for! He may well stand as a symbol of the futility of all opposition to Christ the King.

The fate of these few infants is a strange one. In their brief lives they have won immortal fame. They died for the Christ whom they never knew. These lambs were slain for the sake of the Lamb who lived while

Little flowers of martyrdom,

Roses by the whirlwind shorn,'

That quotation, from Jeremiah 31:16, requires a brief consideration. The original is still less a prophecy than was the passage in Hosea. It is a highly imaginative and grandly weird personification of the mighty mother of three of the tribes, stirring in her tomb, and lifting up the shrill lamentation of Eastern grief over her children carried away to captivity. That hopeless wail from the grave by Bethlehem is heard as far north as Ramah, beyond Jerusalem. Once again, says Matthew, the same grief might have been imaginatively heard from the long-silent tomb so near the scene of this pitiful tragedy. And the second ancestral weeping was fuller of woe than the bitterness of that first lament; for this bewailed the actual slaughter of innocents, and wept the miseries that so soon gathered round the coming of the King, so long waited for. Seeing that the prophet's words do not describe a fact, but are a poetical personification to convey simply the idea of calamity, which might make the dead mother weep, the word fulfilled can obviously be applied to them only in a modified and somewhat elastic sense, and is sufficiently defended if we recognise in the slaughter of these children a woe which, though small in itself, yet, when considered in reference to its inflicter, a usurping king of the Jews, and in reference to its occasion, the desire to slay the God-sent King, and in reference to its innocent victims, and in reference to its place as first of the tragic series of martyrdoms for Messiah, was heavy with a sorer burden of national disaster, when seen by eyes made wise by death, than even the captivity which seemed to falsify the promises of God and the hopes of a thousand years.

**III. The return to Nazareth, and the prophecy fulfilled therein.**

They who patiently wait for guidance, and move not till the cloud moves, are never disappointed, nor left undirected. Joseph is a pattern of self-abnegating submission, and an example of its rewards. The angel ever comes again to those who have once obeyed him and continue to wait. This third appearance is described in the same words as the former. His coming was the appearance of a familiar presence His command begins by a verbal repetition of the former summons, Arise and take the young child and His mother, and go, and then passes to a singular allusion to that command to Moses which was the first step towards the former calling of God's son--the nation--out of Egypt. All the men are dead which sought thy life, was the encouragement to Moses to go back. They are dead that sought the young child's life, is the encouragement to Joseph. It sums up in one sentence the failure of the first attempt, and is like an epitaph cut on a tombstone for a man yet living,--a prophecy of the end of all succeeding efforts to crush Christ and thwart His work. The dreaded infant's hand is mightier than all mailed fists, or fingers that hold a pen. Christ lives and grows; Herod rots and dies.

Apparently Joseph's intention was to return to Bethlehem. He may have thought that Nazareth would scarcely satisfy the angel's injunction to go to the Land of Israel, or that David's city was the right home for David's heir. At all events, his perplexity appeals to Heaven for direction; and, for the fourth time, his course is marked for him by a dream, whether through the instrumentality of the angel who knew the way to his couch so well, we are not told, Archelaus, Herod's son, who had received Judæ¡ on the partition at his father's death, was a smaller Herod, as cruel and less able. There was more security in the obscurity of Nazareth, under the less sanguinary sway of Antipas, whose share of his father's vices was his lust, rather than his ferocity. So, after so many wanderings, and with such strange new experience and thoughts, the silent, steadfast Joseph and the meek mother bring back their mysterious charge and secret to the humble old home. Matthew does not seem to have known that it had formerly been their home, but his account is no contradiction of Luke's.

Again he is reminded of a prophecy, or perhaps, rather, of many prophecies, for he uses the plural prophets, as if he were summing up the tenor of more than one utterance. The words which he gives are not found in any prophet. But we know that to call a man a Nazarene was the same thing as to call him lowly and despised. The scoff of the Pharisee to Nicodemus's timid appeal on Christ's behalf, and the guileless Nathaniel's quest ion, show that. The fact that Christ by His residence in Nazareth became known as the Nazarene, and so shared in the contempt attaching to all Galileans, and especially to the inhabitants of that village, is a kind of concentration of all the obscurity and ignominy of His lot. The name was nailed over His head on the cross as a scornful reductio ad absurdum of His claims to be King of Israel This explanation of the evangelist's meaning does not exclude a reference in his mind to the prophecy in Isaiah xi. 1, where Messiah is called a branch or more properly, a shoot for which the Hebrew word is netzer. The name Nazareth is probably etymologically connected with that word, and may have been given to the little village contemptuously to express its insignificance. The meaning of the prophecy is that the offspring of David, who should come when the Davidic house was in the lowest depths of obscurity, like a tree of which only the stump is left, should not appear in royal pomp, or in a lofty condition, but as insignificant, feeble, and of no account. Such prophecy was fulfilled in the very fact that He was all His life known as of Nazareth and the verbal assonance between that name, the shoot and the word Nazarene is a finger-post pointing to the meaning of the place of abode chosen for Him. The mere fact of residence there, and the consequent contempt, do not exhaust the prophecies to which reference is made. These might have been fulfilled without such a literal and external fulfilment. But it serves, like the literal riding upon an ass, and many other instances in Christ's life, to lead dull apprehensions to perceive more plainly that He is the theme of all prophecy, and that in His life the trivial is significant and nothing is accidental.